THE FEAR OF GOD THE TOUCHSTONE.

A Sermon

DELIVERED ON TUESDAY MORNING, MAY 27, 1851,

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AT ST. MARGARET'S CHURCH, LOTHBURY.

"But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God."—NEHEMIAH v. 15.

WE have selected these words from the first lesson of this morning's service, thinking that they will furnish much material for profitable and interesting discourse. You will remember that Nehemiah—for he it is who utters the words—had been cup-bearer to Artaxerxes, king of Persia. Whilst discharging the duties of his office, he had heard of the afflicted condition of his countrymen, whom the edict of Cyrus had restored to their land; and in consequence he asked and obtained leave to go up to Jerusalem. Having reached the city of his fathers, and found it without walls, so that its inhabitants were exposed to insult and hardship, he spared no pains to restore it to something of its former state; so that it rose from its ruins, and was again a secure habitation. At the same time, he busied himself with promoting a moral reformation. Whilst he encircled Jerusalem with towers, he laboured to increase in her the real source of strength—the piety and righteousness of her inhabitants. He then discharged for several years in the most admirable and successful manner the office of governor, with which he had been invested, and established an extraordinary claim on the esteem and gratitude of his countrymen. But it was not only by his energy and policy, it was also by his disinterestedness that he distinguished himself in his arduous government. You find him in our text contrasting himself with former governors who had been "chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver."

Now, we are not, of course, to conclude that these former governors had necessarily been to blame in receiving the assistance and revenue of the people over whom they bare sway. Where the duties of an office are faithfully discharged, its emoluments may be rightfully claimed. If, indeed, the "former governors" had been severe in exacting their rights, or if they either practised or sanctioned extortion, or if they had shown no compassion towards an impoverished people, they were deserving of censure, but not simply because they received the stipend annexed to the government. Nehemiah, however, took nothing. He knew the poverty of the people; his own circumstances were affluent, and therefore he waived his right, and determined that his government should be as gratuitous as beneficial. It is not our place to set forth the excellence of this conduct. The manner in which it is recorded sufficiently shows that it was pleasing to God. Our business is rather to fasten on the motive; for this it really was which made the conduct acceptable—"but so did not I," says Nehemiah, "*because* of the fear of God." It is very easy to see that he might have displayed the same absence of self on quite a different principle. You can have no difficulty in supposing a man

destitute of the "fear of God" suceeding, like Nehemiah, to the government, and refusing, like him, to be a burden on the people. Who does not know that patriotism, however rare it may be amongst us, is not so wholly extinct that the case might not occur of a man devoting all his thought and talent to his country's good, and neither receiving nor wishing anything in the shape of remuneration. Indeed, if there were no scope for chivalrous display, the mere desire of popularity might induce a man to act like Nehemiah, especially if, as was the case with this ruler, a largeness of private means made him independent of public recompense. At all events, there would have been no cause for surprise had we had a case of disinterestedness without hearing also the motives; and we should have been at no loss to account for Nehemiah's refusing the emoluments of office, without supposing him wholly actuated by "the fear of God."

Here, then, you come at the gist of the subject proposed by our text. Give it your close attention. We are not about to hold up Nehemiah to your applause and imitation *simply because* he could draw an ostentatious contrast between himself and former governors—simply because he could say that he had not "been chargeable unto the people, and had not eaten their bread and drank of their wine," but because, after stating how his predecessors had exacted their revenues, and had allowed even wrong and oppression, he could say—"So did not I, *because* of the fear of God."

Now, you are all well aware that in the Christian religion it is the motive which is considered as giving worth to the action. We are directed to "keep the heart with all diligence, because out of it are the issues of life," as though we were not to be tried by what is external, but what is internal, and the springs alone of our conduct were to decide our future portion. And forasmuch as we are to be tried at last by a Being who "searcheth the heart," and before whom "all things are naked and open," it is evident that motives may finally be made the touchstone to which actions are brought, though they could not be if men were summoned to a mere human tribunal.

In many cases it is impossible for us to ascertain the motives from which a man acts; and where there should be no difference in the thing done, we may have no reason for making any in our estimate of the action. But it is not so with God. There may be all the appearance of charity, whilst in God's sight we are cold and uncharitable. There may be high attainments, too, in morality, whilst God still regards us as unclean. It becomes us, then, to rest content with nothing outward—to labour at searching into the springs of our conduct, and to bring them to the test which God's word prescribes. After all, it is not a difficult thing to deceive ourselves in regard of our spiritual condition. A man who has no intention of being a hypocrite to others, may very easily be a hypocrite to himself; he may, that is, pass himself off upon himself as a religious man, a true disciple of Christ, whilst he is still in "the gall of bitterness, having neither part nor lot in the matter." And he may be both led into and confirmed in the delusion by giving heed to nothing but his outward deportment. This may not perceptibly differ from that of those who are confessedly righteous—the same attention to the forms of religion, the same virtue, the same rectitude, the same liberality, and his conclusion will be that there is no difference of character. Certainly no man can propose a more momentous question to himself than this, Am I a true Christian, walking in the alone path which can lead me to heaven? If, as it now appears, there be great room for self-deception in the answering this question, of course there is the more need that it be often proposed, and that the reply be not given except after a process of sifting inquiry. We will endeavour by God's help to assist you in giving a true answer. The case of Nehemiah will just furnish what we need. The conduct which he pursued might, as we have shown you, have originated in wholly different motives—in the one case most praiseworthy, in the other void of all moral excellence. You see at once, that ostentation, or vain-glory, or the desire of that honour which cometh from man, might have urged a governor to act as Nehemiah acted, with the same rigorous self-dedication, and

with contempt of pecuniary recompense. And you know very well, that if it had been through the working of any such motive, that Nehemiah laboured in the duties and refused the revenues of office, then would his conduct, in place of gaining the approval of God, have been reckoned a manifestation of selfishness, and have been marked out accordingly for punishment. If a man have resolved to be disinterested in order that he may be popular, every one must observe the absurdity of the contradiction. There cannot be disinterestedness where there is respect to our own advantage —where we make that advantage the source of money or of renown. And thus you have, in the instance of Nehemiah, an action to which nothing but the motive could give excellence. It is "*because* he feared God" that Nehemiah refused the revenues of office. So that whilst the world might have been contrasting the conduct of this Governor of Jerusalem with that of his predecessors, and extolling him as a model of all that was generous, and noble, and patriotic,—oh! it would have been but too possible, that in the sight of a glorious God he wore no aspect but that of a proud lover of self; for, however extortionate and covetous might have been those who preceded him, making themselves "chargeable unto the people, and taking of their bread and their wine, besides forty shekels of silver," his refusal to imitate them could not have been acceptable in the sight of his Maker, unless from the heart he could say—"So did not I, *because* of the fear of God."

Now, we believe that Nehemiah here ascribes his own conduct to the motive from which every action must spring that obtains the approval of God. The man who "fears God" is, as you must all be aware, one of the chief scriptural definitions of a righteous individual—one who has been "translated out of darkness into marvellous light." To say of a man that he fears God, is to say of him, according to the phraseology of the Bible, that he labours to act up to the measure of revelation with which he is favoured; to appropriate the privileges, to act upon the motives, and to perform the duties of the dispensation beneath which he is placed. It is a general and comprehensive expression, a kind of summary of character, which is to be expanded into particulars and shown to include the various features of spiritual excellence. Thus, under the Christian dispensation, he alone can be said to fear God, who has repented of sin, has put faith in Christ, and is striving to "adorn in all things the doctrine of the Saviour." For the fear of God that is required of Christians, is not a slavish, but a filial fear—the fear of a child who is full of affection towards a tender and considerate parent, and who would grieve himself in grieving so benignant a relative. A fear such as this cannot subsist unless there be a consciousness that "now are we the sons of God," and that though "by nature children of wrath," we have been brought by Christ within the circle of the heavenly family. It may have been through "the terror of the Lord," that we were first brought to serious thoughts, earnest resolutions, and fervent supplications; yet, when we have felt something of consciousness of danger, there will be a thousand-fold more motive to us to strive after holiness, in the love and grace exhibited on Calvary, than all the lightnings and thunders of Sinai which made so tremendous the giving of the law. The man, therefore, who is actuated by the fear of God, will have reference to God, as that wonderfully compassionate, yet wonderfully just being, who would not leave us to perish, and yet not save us without an expiation. He will labour to do good works, not supposing they can be in any degree meritorious, for he has turned to Christ as the alone procuring cause of salvation. He longs to evince love toward the Being who so loved him, as to give himself for him; to promote God's glory, and bring others to participate in the blessings of which faith made him possessor. Yea, this is "the fear of God" as it subsists in the true Christian breast; and as we doubt not it subsisted in Nehemiah's, if due allowance be made for the imperfection of his acquaintance with the scheme of redemption. Now, if you would judge of any action, and determine whether it be acceptable unto God, you are to inquire whether this motive can be found in

ull force—whether in doing it, you have reference to God as a reconciled Father, and desire to testify your sense of his love to you in Christ. There may be many other motives from which actions might equally spring, so that, in the eye of the world, there is no difference whatever; but if your conduct be pleasing in the sight of God, it must be by your "walking worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called"—earnest in the performance of Christian duties on Christian principles. It must be because you act as a member of Christ, inasmuch as it is nothing but association with his Son which can render man the object of anything but wrath—place him in such position, and endow him with such powers, as may enable him to avert a just vengeance. Will you not say that it must be "from the fear of God" which you act?—that fear which is implanted by the Spirit, which adopts into the heavenly family, and conforms to the image of its Lord, and which, once implanted, is a holy principle, making (if we may use the expression) Christ the motive and God the end of every particular of conduct. So that you are not to try yourselves by the points of external difference which there may be between yourselves and other men; you are not to be content with the discovery that you do not commit sins which many around you commit, and that you perform duties which many around you neglect. This was not sufficient for Nehemiah; neither must this be sufficient for you. We now furnish you with a simple rule, but one of universal application. We require you to examine whether you are acting as disciples of Christ,—whether you are actuated by the feeling that God hath made you his children,—whether it be indeed the love of children to a parent—a parent who has done for them more than thought can measure—which prompts your plans and prescribes your conduct. Others may be content with other measures and other standards, but be ye not satisfied till ye can abide this criterion. When you hear of the wickedness of the wicked, and when you behold how God is defied, his law set at nought, and his gospel despised,—oh! think it not enough that you can declare yourselves free from the vices and impieties which disgrace human nature. You must be able to go farther, a vast deal further than this. None of you must be satisfied, when considering the evil conduct of others, that with Nehemiah you can say, "so did not I"—I am not "chargeable unto the people"—I have not "taken of them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver;"—can you further say, with Nehemiah, "So did not I, *because* of the fear of God?"

And now, suppose we break up this general truth, and exhibit some prominent instances. You will observe that we want to show you how the same action may proceed from wholly different motives, and that no action can be approved in God's sight which may not be traced to his fear. Let us take, for example, attention to the outward duties and forms of religion, and examine in what case alone this is really of worth. There are, unhappily, thousands in a professedly Christian community who treat with utter contempt the ordinances of religion, who know nothing of the Sabbath as a day of sacred rest, nor of the Church as the place of communion with their God. And we count it great matter of thankfulness, in regard of all those who now hear our voice, that they are not at least living in this virtual heathenism. Your coming to church on week days, snatching, as many of you do, a few moments from the din and bustle of trade, is gratifying evidence that you are not neglectful of the public means of grace. But then we cannot close our eyes to the great probability, that with many, this attendance on public worship is not the produce of such motives as God approves. We rejoice, indeed, that there is this attendance; for where means of grace are used, a blessing may be hoped for; but we cannot take the attendance as evidence of piety, because we know that many causes may tend to throng our churches, and yet real godliness not be of the number. We know that the custom of society—the mere force of habit—compliance with the wishes of friends—or a desire of setting an example to others, may have much influence in bringing men to God's house, who are all the while destitute of the love of

his name; and we further know, that in many other instances there may be the substitution of the sign for the sacrifice, of the outward ordinance for the inward grace, and that, with every appearance of devotion and earnestness, there may be virtually a resting in form, or a listening to preaching, just so far as it contributes to animal excitement. So that we never dare take the throng of a multitude, nor the air of deep and solemn engrossment which may be diffused over an assembly, as sufficient testimony of the prevalence of vital Christianity. We know that there may have been all this indication of the prevalence of vital Christianity, where, after all, there has been little of heart-felt religion; and that if we could scrutinize the characters of individuals, whose reverent seriousness may give so sublime an aspect to a public gathering, we might find only here and there one who "loved the Lord Jesus in sincerity." And knowing this, is it our business to press upon you the examining from what motives, and upon what principles, you frequent the house of prayer? If it be possible, that a man may be punctual in attendance on public worship, and listen with a sort of rivetted earnestness to the preaching of the word, and nevertheless retain the deadness of soul which must as effectually exclude from the kingdom of heaven, as the breaking of the Sabbath, and the forsaking of the sanctuary, ought we not to be urgent with you, that you be on your guard against the deceiving yourselves, against the concluding that you must be necessarily safe for eternity, because you are statedly at church, and you experience a kind of delight in listening to the preacher, and you omit no opportunity of sharing in the holy communion of the body and blood of the Redeemer. We want you to search into the motive whence all this proceeds. We wish you to examine how far that "fear of God," which we have endeavoured to explain, is the producing cause of all that attendance on ordinances by which you are distinguished, and which may have another origin, and that, too, a base and an injurious.

It is not an abstruse and difficult inquiry on which we would set you when we thus ask you to look into the motives by which you attend. It will be yours to decide whether you are actuated by "the fear of God;" to decide, whether in going up to the church, you go up in obedience to the Divine command; whether in hearkening to the preacher you are listening for a message from above, believing preaching to be the ordinance of God, and expecting therefore instruction to the soul through the instituted channel; and whether in receiving the sacred and mystic elements of bread and wine, your motive be compliance with the precept of your dying Lord, and your hope that of being saved through his alone atoning sacrifice. We pray you to put these questions to yourselves, and answer them faithfully, as in the presence of the heart-searching God. We pray you to be bold and honest in examining what share the fear of God—that filial fear which produces hatred to all that will displease, and love to all that will delight your heavenly Father, has in the keeping you close to your church duties and observances. If you are tempted to the neglecting these duties and observances, is it "the fear of God" that withholds you from yielding to the temptation? And when sickness or any insurmountable hindrance keeps you severed from the sanctuary, do you prove that you value them as the means of sacred intercourse with Christ, by feeling something of what David felt when he thus addressed God in the wilderness—"My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; to see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary?" Indeed it must be by such proofs as these that you determine that in performing the public duties of religion you are not offering unto God what is styled in Scripture "the sacrifice of fools." And when you hear of numbers who profane the Sabbath, turning it into a day of idleness or dissipation; or of others who, though they may attend the sanctuary, manifest by their languor and listlessness that they feel it to be a burdensome service; or, again, of a third class, who, though assiduous in hearkening to the preached word, put constant contempt on the most solemn ordinance of Christianity, and are

never found at the sacramental table;—oh! we say, when you hear of men thus living in the neglect even of the forms of religion, then be not satisfied that you can draw an advantageous comparison, so far as appearances are concerned, and say, "So do not we;" think of Nehemiah and his account of how former governors had been chargeable to the people; be not content unless, after actual searching into principles and motives, you can say with Nehemiah—"So do not we, *because* of the fear of God."

Now you will readily perceive, that precisely the same kind of statements is to be advanced in regard of all the ordinary duties of life. There is a distinction, which cannot be too often or too strongly defined, between the *merit* of good works and the *necessity* for good works. We are bound to preach to you, that you cannot be saved by good works; we are equally bound to preach to you, that you cannot be saved without good works. And when we tell the man of high morals, and unflinching integrity and high generosity, but who is a stranger to Christ, that he can no more be saved in his present condition than one of the worst profligacy and honesty, we are not representing morality, integrity, and generosity, as things to be dispensed with by the inheritor of the kingdom of heaven; we are simply affirming, that they are of worth only as fruit of a divinely implanted principle, and that if they have any other origin, they may indeed be beneficial to society, but they cannot promote salvation. It would be a contradiction in terms, to speak of a real Christian who is not upright, and moral, and liberal; but he is not a real Christian, *because* he is upright, and moral, and liberal; rather he is upright, moral, and liberal, because he is a real Christian. It is a painful thing, to have to bring to the touchstone of the Bible, and to subject to a rigid anatomy, much that naturally commands admiration, and to convict as worthless, in the sight of God, what has the closest resemblance to Christian deportment, yea, may even excel it in its ordinary exhibition; but we are too well aware, that all that is attractive, and beautiful, and beneficial in conduct, may be found in a heart still at enmity with God, to allow of our concluding, that what deservedly commands human esteem must necessarily receive Divine approbation. Who knows not, that there is in many men a kind of philosophical sense of the beauty and dignity of virtue, a native repugnance to what is gross and dishonourable, and a fine sympathy with suffering, which will go far to the producing what is regarded as exemplary in character, although there may be at the same time an utter ignorance, and even contempt, of the doctrines of Christianity?

I can feel sure of many who now hear me, that in all the dealings of life they display a conscientious rectitude which would challenge inquiry; that they have an utter detestation of what is base and underhand, and that they would shun dishonest gain, as they would the wages of foul crime. I am sure of them, that even slander can find nothing on which to fasten in their conduct, but that, in every relation of life, they deserve, what they have, an unsullied name, being sincere in friendship, strict in morals, large-handed in charity, and ready to concur in every endeavour to increase the sum of human happiness. But we cannot feel so sure that it is "the fear of God," which produces what is in itself so worthy of admiration; and we would have these persons propose to themselves such questions as these:—"Whence does my morality spring? whence my integrity? whence my generosity?" "Am I moral, because I feel vice to be a low and degrading thing, unworthy of a rational being, and injurious to a social? or because I love God, who cannot tolerate iniquity, who commands me to be holy, even as he is holy?" Is it because I have a natural yearning over suffering which it would be painful to resist? or because I have pride in enrolling my name amongst the patrons of benevolent institutions that I am profuse in distributing to the poor? or is it because I feel myself to be the disciple of one who "had not where to lay his head;" and who, as we have heard in this morning's lesson, may be "clothed in the naked," and "fed in the hungry," who claim the succours of his followers?

It is not our part, to attempt the answering these questions in the case of any one of our hearers; but whilst we know, that motives which Christianity does not implant —nay, rather which Christianity seeks to eradicate—may cause a close imitation of the conduct which Christianity requires, it is our part to put you all on your guard, lest you conclude yourselves true Christians though you have not God's fear. The loftiness of morals, the strictness of integrity, the work of philanthropy, the largeness of charity —all these are of no avail, unless the actuating principles be faith in the Redeemer, and a desire to be like him. And when, therefore, you hear of men who are but the slaves of their appetites and lusts; and of others who disgrace themselves by fraud and extortion; and of a third class, who, with ample means at their disposal, close their ears against the cry of distress; oh! you are not to be satisfied because with the Pharisee you can thank God that you are "not as other men are." Think of Nehemiah as he compares himself with former governors who had wrung their revenues from an overwrought people. You must examine into the cause of the difference between yourselves and those whom you justly reprobate; and in place of being content after telling up their faults, so that you can boldly say,—"So do not we," give yourselves no rest until you can declare with Nehemiah—"So do not we, *because* of the fear of God."

Now it would be easy to go yet more into particulars and to show you, in a great variety of cases, how the worth of an action is dependent on its motive; but we think that enough has been said, to enable every one to place himself in the position of Nehemiah, and apply our text to his own condition and conduct. It has been our object, throughout this discourse, to impress on your minds the important and fundamental truth, that men may do what is *right*, and do it from *wrong* motives. It is right that the Sabbath should be observed, and attention given to every ordinance of religion; it is right that a man be unblemished in his morals, upright in his dealings, generous in his charities, but he may do all this, and be all this, without any change of heart, from mere worldly principles, or from natural temper, or in the dream of self-righteousness. And if such be the case, he will derive nothing from what in itself is right, but greater means of imposing on both others and on himself, so that he may pass for a true Christian with every being except the Judge, who is to fix his place for eternity.

There is a great deal in this fact, to force on us diligent self-examination. And in order that every one of you may be able to investigate his own heart, and reach, by the Divine help, a sound decision, we have endeavoured to lay open to you the motive, which may be said to include all others by which, as Christian men, you ought to be actuated. This motive is the fear of God; "So did not I, because of the fear of God." There is nothing required in order to your determining what is right in itself as well as in motive, but the examining whether the fear of God have an influence upon you when doing an action. We admonish you with all seriousness and affection that you be not content with a superficial glance at your condition, but that you take pains to search, and to probe, and pray earnestly to God, that he would lay you open to yourselves. It is not enough, you observe, that you can say that you are not worse that others. It is not enough that you can say that you are better than others. If Nehemiah could have gone no further than this, he would never have been commemorated as one whom God approved. You must go further; you must, if we may make use of such an expression, be *good* on *good* principles. You must observe the Sunday, because it is the Lord's day; you must frequent the church, because it is God's house; you must delight in the Bible, because it is God's word; you must shun vice, because it is displeasing to God; you must avoid dishonesty, however secret, because God requires "truth in the inward parts;" and you must cultivate holiness, and practise charity, because God "hath called you unto purity of life." Ah! this it is to abstain from evil and to do good, "*because* of the fear of God." "Happy," saith Solomon in the book of Proverbs, "happy is

the man who feareth alway." He does not mean, and he could not mean, that the man is happy who is always full of apprehensions of wrath, oppressed with terror, and agitated by anxiety. He means that to be truly blessed, is to be under a continual sense of God's presence, a reference to his will, a zeal for his honour, a desire for his favour; for all these are but proofs of filial fear. It is the filial fear of which Scripture speaks, when it puts the God-fearing man for the righteous and the faithful. And happy, thrice happy, is the man, who "feareth alway" with the fear of a member of Christ, of one who knows himself incorporate with the mystical body of God's Son. Fearing his Maker with the fear of love, he fears nothing else with the fear of dread. Others may shrink from suffering; but he knows that "all things work together for his good;" and he cheerfully submits to every appointment of the God whom he serves. Others may shrink from dying, but he knows that Christ Jesus "hath abolished death," and taken away the sting, for all who believe on his name. Yea, whilst many around him are perplexed by cares, torn by disquietudes, and harassed by dread of the future, almost weary of life, and yet scared at death; oh! he can say (and it is a glorious thing to be able to say from the heart),—"So am not I, because of the fear of God."

May you all have this "fear of God!" for then you may look to possess that "peace of God which passeth all understanding."